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ABSTRACT

Educators in speech communication are confronted with determining what criteria comprise "disciplinary breadth" in basic courses. Such a course ought to teach students about the disciplinary perspective and process, promote active learning, emphasize methods of thinking characteristic of the discipline, and encourage life-long learning. Most basic courses tend to be behaviorally focused in applying knowledge to behavior and integrating that knowledge into students' life-long repertoires, but these courses neglect the methods of thinking characteristic of the discipline. Basic courses should be structured so as to help students understand how professionals in the discipline understand their methods. How professionals study must be the focus, not just what is studied. To teach such a course, educators need to become more aware of their own way of proceeding that may be largely intuitive or only tacitly understood. Furthermore, students need to be challenged to identify and understand their own "logic-in-use" and the different interpretations resulting from its application. (Twenty footnotes are included.) (KEH)

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The Basic Course as a "Disciplinary Breadth" Course

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The Basic Course as a "Disciplinary Breadth" Course

by Patricia R. Palmerton

> "[E]xternalized action, or *praxis*, authenticates insight and creates situations out of which new knowledge can grow."
>
> --Mary Daly

Scenario number one:

Recently I was at a social gathering, talking with an acquaintance about what I teach. I said something like, "Communication studies, courses like public speaking, interpersonal communication, group communication, communication theory."

"Oh, communications," he said. "That's that required course I took when I was a freshman at the U." He was referring to freshman composition.

"Well, that would be one type of course," I replied.

"You mean, there's more? I mean, I never thought of it as being anything else."

As our discussion continued, he expressed amazement that there is actually a discipline of Speech Communication. Moreover, as a lawyer, he was fascinated that there is actually a discipline that studies argument, that finding the substance of what there is to say could be the province of a discipline like Speech Communication. As we analyzed a recent law case, he continued to be amazed at the wealth of knowledge to be gained from our field.

Scenario number two:

I had just met someone at a social function honoring a recent PhD in psychology and this exchange occurred. The other person had an MA in counseling. "What do you teach at Hamline?" she asked. "Speech and communication," I replied. "Oh, you teach communications? *I've* taught *that*!"

What do these examples mean? Who are we as a discipline? How do we represent ourselves as a discipline to those outside our field? How do we represent ourselves as a discipline in those courses non-majors are required to take? Where does the "basic course" fit into the picture of disciplinary definition and representation?

This paper is one of musings and questions. It is not a finished argument. Rather, I hope that my comments might engender discussion about who we are as a discipline, and about how we ought to teach in and about our discipline. The answers, I think, have implications for the ways we conceptualize the basic course.

I have not come to these questions on my own. Five years ago the faculty at Hamline University voted to institute the second phase of a massive curricular change, a change which required that we reconceptualize the notion of "discipline" and then consider how we teach students about our disciplines.[1] The thinking that led to this reevaluation was embodied in the criteria for what were called "disciplinary breadth" courses.

Hamline's conception of "disciplinary breadth" is my starting place, for it forces into awareness basic assumptions about how we conceptualize disciplines and our subsequent approaches to teaching.

What is a "Disciplinary Breadth" Course?

The idea of revising our definition of "disciplinary breadth" grew from criticisms of the previous curriculum. Previously, breadth requirements were defined primarily in terms of domain. If a course was taught within the boundaries of a given discipline and if it covered sufficient content of the discipline ("breadth"), then that course was considered an adequate representative of that discipline. For example, a course taught in the History department which provided exposure to the content studied by historians was viewed as giving exposure to history as a discipline. This course, in turn, was seen as providing breadth in the Humanities to a student taking that course.

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[1] Phase I consisted of instituting Writing Across the Curriculum, Speaking Across the Curriculum, Freshmen Seminars, and Computer Intensive courses.

Most courses on a list of "core" courses acceptable for fulfilling distribution requirements were defined by content area: Twentieth-Century Novel; Ancient Philosophy; North American Indian; American National Government; Introduction to Chinese Civilization; Medieval Art.

Those involved with curriculum reform were dissatisfied with this approach however, and out of their dissatisfaction one question kept emerging: Should students' knowledge of a discipline be defined solely by the content studied? The answer, at Hamline, was "no." Two key ideas emerged.[2] First, students should not only be exposed to the content of a discipline, but to the *processes* of the discipline. Students need to see how individuals working within that discipline go about dealing with the problems addressed, how those problems are identified, how they are formulated, and how they go about working with those problems. Second, students need to be able to take away something that will be useful. That is, students need to be able to learn how to apply those processes to their continuing experiences with the phenomena being studied.

From these ideas, four criteria were established for what would comprise a "disciplinary breadth" course. A "disciplinary breadth" course will teach students about a new disciplinary perspective and process (this assumes some students will be taking the course who have had no previous exposure to the field), the pedagogy of the course will promote active learning, there will be an emphasis upon methods of thinking characteristic of the discipline, and the course will be structured to encourage life-long learning.

As anyone who has gone through curriculum reform knows, establishing new criteria for determining which courses can fulfill distribution requirements creates near chaos. At Hamline, the criteria demanded not only a change in the content of courses comprising the core, but a change in pedogogy. We could not fall back upon old systems for determining which courses would be appropriate for these new distribution requirements. We had to completely rethink how we were representing our disciplines, and we had to rethink how we were teaching about our disciplines.

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[2] Personal communication with Don Rice, faculty member in Modern Languages, Hamline University, member of the Curriculum Task Force.

Clearly, courses defined solely by content would not meet the new criteria. As a result, departments have embarked upon extensive courses of study to re-evaluate how they define their own disciplines.[3] In Speech Communication, we are confronted with determining what these criteria mean for our introductory courses, both Public Speaking and Introduction to Communication Studies, as well as upper division courses.

"Disciplinary Breadth" and the Basic Course

In considering speech courses, meeting the criterion of "active learning" is the easiest. The pedagogical approaches typical of many speech courses require the active involvement of students: speeches, experiential learning, and group work, for example. Life-long learning is also a consistent response to our courses. Many of us have had many students tell us they have immediately applied in their lives concepts and ideas studied in our courses. We are a "practical discipline", as Robert Craig terms us, *praxis* being a defining characteristic.[4] Our courses tend to be behaviorally focused, applying knowledge to behavior and integrating that knowledge into students' life-long repertoires.

But what of the "processes" of the discipline? What are the "methods of thinking characteristics of our discipline"? The notion of process is an exciting way to conceptualize what we as educators are about: teaching the processes of learning about, of thinking about the subject(s) of our discipline. Intuitively, I think we in communication studies do so more than many disciplines because of our focus upon *praxis*, or speech as a practical art. Nevertheless, when confronted with articulating how we do so it is not quite such a simple matter. Do we really teach

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[3] A major grant from FIPSE has provided funds for release time and honoraria so that all faculty members in selected departments can participate in reformulating approaches to teaching within the discipline.

[4] Robert T. Craig, "Communication as a Practical Discipline," in *Rethinking Communication, Vol. 1: Paradigm Issues*, Brenda Dervin, Lawrence Grossberg, Barbara J. O'Keefe, and Ellen Wartella, eds., (Newbury Park: Sage, 1989) p. 97.

processes, or are we focused primarily upon *products*. We *use* the process, but do we *teach* process? Do we teach *about* processes? What does it mean to teach about processes? How *do* we think in our field? What is "characteristic" thinking in our discipline? What are "characteristic methods" in our discipline? According to Hamline's scheme, these processes and methods should be made accessible to students with no previous background in the field. The basic courses would seem, then, to be the natural place.

So who are we? What are we? What comprises our discipline? What comprises not only our domain, but what comprises how we go about investigating and thinking about the phenomena we define as our domain? How *do* we formulate the problems we address in our discipline? How do we teach about thinking in our discipline? How do we teach the methods of our discipline in our basic course? As a corrolary, how are we then representing our discipline in our teaching? What and who do students learn we, as a discipline, are?

As I began studying what the new requirements mean for us, it also became clear that these questions do not exist only at Hamline. In our own discipline, some have been calling for similar awarenesses. For example, Cassandra Book has made the point that we need to translate our knowledge of the discipline into the experiences students have in our classes so they will have an accurate idea of what the field of communication is all about:

> In essence, we need to examine the ways in which we stimulate students to think about the discipline of communication by the ways in which we implicitly or explicitly represent the discipline to them. . . . How teachers understand the disciplinary knowledge and how they represent that content to students through the individual pedagogical content decisions and the broader curricular decisions they make affects the nature of knowledge students will come to have about the discipline.[5]

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[5] Cassandra L. Book, "Communication Education: Pedagogical Content Knowledge Needed," *Communication Education*: 319-320.

It is not only a matter of representation, however. It is a matter of self-concept. W. Barnett Pearce argues that our "radically new concept of what communication is like, what work it does, and how it works" has significance for the analysis of the "human condition" on all levels.[6] Communication, according to Pearce, needs to be conceptualized as a "perspective", a new way of thinking about humanity, not as a "thing", or a "tool", or a particular form of human action.[7] Robert Craig has argued that communication is a "practical discipline." According to Craig, "what is most interesting and distinctive about the field [is] the intimate tie that exists between the discipline's work and practical communicative activities. . . . As a practical discipline, our essential purpose is to cultivate communicatative *praxis*, or practical art, through critical study."[8]

While recognizing that paradigm and disciplinary questions are not settled and that others have taken different perspectives, I would like to use Craig's suggestions to explore questions regarding the role of the basic course in teaching disciplinary perspective. I will also make reference to Pearce's work. The ideas discussed by both are relevant to the basic course as public speaking and to the introductory course in communication studies. I'll address the basic course in public speaking first.

Public Speaking as a "Disciplinary Breadth" Course

Craig discusses the art of rhetoric, noting that in rhetorical tradition there are three characteristics that "could be exemplary for communication theory in general: (1) a dialectical interplay between theory and practice; (2) a detailed technical account of the practice; and (3) a series of coherent, universalized reconstructions of the practice that collectively highlight its intrinsic principles and values as well as the problems and paradoxes that it inescapably faces."[9]

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[6] W. Barnett Pearce, *Communication and the Human Condition*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, p. 4.

[7] Pearce, 23.

[8] Craig, 97.

[9] Craig, 99.

Applying these ideas to the basic public speaking course raises significant questions about what and how we teach. In the public speaking course we are probably most clearly involved in providing a "detailed technical account of the practice", Craig's second characteristic. For the purposes of discussion, I'll focus my attention instead upon the first and third characteristics.

In the basic public speaking course which is representative of our discipline, we might consider how we address Craig's first characteristic: the *relationship* between the theories we use and the practice we teach. For example, to what extent are we addressing questions of epistemology? A highly relevant question in our field pertains to the tensions that exist between the principles and techniques a speaker displays and thought processes. We teach students to display principles and techniques; do we also have them reflect upon the influence of those techniques, structures, and principles on their own thinking? Upon the thinking encouraged in the audience? How do we address the *process* of invention? Shouldn't we be focusing on these processes as fully as we focus upon the speech products?

Students in public speaking ought to gain an understanding of the social process that *is* public discourse. The traditional approach, which views public speaking as providing a set of tools to apply in order to convey knowledge obtained elsewhere, or to more accurately represent and manage thought, or to achieve understanding in an audience, is only one approach and a limited one at that. As Pearce suggests, an alternative view is that we, as speakers and hearers, as experiencers of the "human condition":

> consist of a cluster of social conversations, and that these patterns of communication consistute the world as we know it. In this view communication is a *primary* social process, the material substance of those things whose reality we often take for granted, such as our "selves," motives, relationships what we would otherwise describe as "facts," and so forth. . . . The characteristics of the material universe and the properties of the mind are sufficiently different that any number

> of stories may be told that "adequately" account for the facts.[10]

Any public speaker is a maker of a "story" that contributes to this social conversation. To neglect the conversation in public speaking is doing our students a disservice.

There are relevant methodological questions in public speaking as well. For example, to what extent do principles and techniques incorporated into practice change the focus of our investigations into the functions and character of public discourse? How do our theories of argument influence the nature of discourse? In what ways do our principles and techniques predispose us as we assess the legitimacy of an argument? How do our codified schemes influence our flexibility? How does one understand the application of skills across contexts? To what extent is this understanding important in the judgments one makes about a piece of public discourse, particularly when the source hails from a different culture?

A public speaking course becomes a matter of not just learning a set of "competencies," but of learning how to judge the applicability, ramifications of use, and limitations of competencies. The subject of our discipline includes analyses of a variety of interpretive variables and alternative conceptions of competencies. A student in our basic public speaking course should come away with an understanding of normative competencies, and also of the controversies surrounding them. A student should become aware that what we assert as competent is culture-bound, and even within U.S. culture is bound by a dominant tradition which is primarily European and male.

Craig's third characteristic is "a series of coherent, universalized reconstructions of the practice that collectively highlight its intrinsic principles and values as well as the problems and paradoxes that it inescapably faces." It is necessary, he argues that our discipline not degenerate into "an incoherent mass of petty rules or reductionistic corruption of practical reason," something that is possible if we solely focus upon the technical account of the practice.[11] Ironically, the questions that students often voice and that we sometimes disdain are the

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[10] Pearce, 11.

[11] Craig, 100

very questions that ought to be addressed. For example, a common student reaction to an assignment to persuade is resistance to the idea of persuasion. Students often question whether it is ethical to persuade. Students question: is persuasion good? Shouldn't the ethical speaker just give out the information and let the audience decide? Others wonder, are emotional appeals unethical? Some question the wisdom of using logic when a fallacy will be more effective. All are questions with a long-standing history, and represent varying philosophic positions. Craig has identified more:

> Is the unscientific opinion produced by rhetoric the enemy of truth, or its own sort of truth, or the only truth possible? Is emotion the antithesis of reason, or its helpmate, or its true nature? Does artifice destroy sincerity or make it possible? Does technique destroy art or make it possible? Does rhetoric concern form instead of substance? But what are form and substance and can they be separated, really?[12]

For over two thousand years we have wrangled with these questions: they are characteristic of our discipline. They are integral to an understanding of our discipline. As Craig argues, "To comprehend the art of rhetoric is now and again to be agitated by such problems, to understand both their great difficulty and their potential universal relevance."[13] Addressing these questions is a considerable task for a public speaking course. Or is it? If the goal of the course is, in part, to expose students to the thinking and methods of the discipline, then these types of questions are integral to the practice that we teach. A course in which the goals is for students to learn *how* to speak must address these kinds of questions if students are to learn the processes and thinking that eventuate in skilled oratorical practices. Furthermore, such an approach is needed is students are to believe our discipline is more than a place to learn a set of pre-formed actions.

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[12] Craig, 100

[13] Craig, 100.

The Introductory Communication Course as "Disciplinary Breadth"

What about the Introductory Communication course (which may or may not include a unit of public speaking)? The rhetorical tradition is clearly relevant to courses in public speaking, but it is not so clearly applicable to communication theory. In discussions about communication theory, "methodology" seems to be a key issue, a concern consistent with the call for exposing students to "methods of thinking characteristics of the discipline." Methodology, says Craig, "is any inquiry into methods."[14] Methodology is concerned with principles of inquiry, with inquiring into the process of inquiring.

Applying the notion of methodology to the basic course, several ideas emerge. First, the course should be structured so as to help students understand how we, in our discipline, understand our methods. *How* we study must be the focus, not just *what* we study. Many introductory texts are clearly focused upon the "what"; a common division is to cite the contexts of communication. These texts describe in detail characteristics of each context, with advice sprinkled throughout the text about practice: how student ought to act. Few introductory texts, however, provide students with insight into the processes of formulating questions relative to communicative phenomena (as opposed to providing students with questions which are already formulated).

If communication is a *perspective*, not a *thing*, then in order for students to come to understand about communication they must understand the *how* of communication. Discussions of who we are as a discipline revolve around issues of methodology: qualitative versus quantitative; qualitative integrated with quantitative; methods which can get at the "domain of meaning and language, of representation and signification;"[15] methods which reflect upon and can deal with the relationship between "structure and experience;"[16]

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[14] Craig, 101

[15] Stuart Hall, "Ideology and Communication Theory," in Dervin, Grossberg, O'Keefe, and Wartella, (eds), 1989, p. 49.

[16] Hall, p. 49

methodologies which grow from a "positivist," "social causation," or "functionalism" perspective.[17] And so forth.

A course which focuses upon methodologies of the discipline would take a different approach from one defined by contexts. It is not that the contextual boundaries are irrelevant. Rather, by focusing upon the process of inquiry into communicative phenomena, students will learn about modes of thinking and methods of inquiry, as well as contexts. Furthermore, by shifting our attention to communication as a *perspective* by which to view phenomena, the "inherent tension between what are sometimes separated as 'actions' and 'meanings'" becomes evident.[18] Understanding the methods of our discipline become integral to understanding the study of communication. The questions and controversies over method and perspective take on new relevance as students experience the multiplicity of interpretions which result from a variety of investigative methods and as students realize the complex interplay between communication and their interpretation of the world.

To teach such a course, we need to become more aware of our own "logic-in-use" or "way of proceeding that may be largely intuitive or only tacitly understood."[19] Furthermore, students would be challenged to identify and understand their own "logics-in-use" and the different interpretions resulting from their application.

Craig suggests that:

> [c]ommunication theory would be a "methodology" of communication; it would concern itself with middle-range methods or "reconstructed logics" of communication that would have normative status insofar as they could be shown to account for the best communicative practices. The second-order methodology of communication *inquiry*, concerned with *methods* of reconstructing communicative

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[17] Anthony Giddens, "The Orthodox Consensus and the Emerging Sythesis," in Dervin, Grossberg, O'Keefe, and Wartella (eds), 1989, p. 53.

[18] Pearce, 23.

[19] Craig, 103

> logics-in-use, would thus be rather like the methodology of methodology itself.[20]

Most texts focus upon the "reconstructed logics" of communication which have normative status. Few provide students with the means to experience the processes *which will help discern those logics*. If a course is to represent and introduce students to our discipline, it needs to focus attention upon how we think about the phenomena we study, including the methodologies we use in studying those phenomena.

Can this be done in an introductory course? Yes. Not at the level of generalizable research results arising from student research, but at the level of students discovering the insight to be gained by critically reflecting upon practices previously taken for granted and by inquiring into those practices--by researching them. By experiencing the multiplicity of meanings associated with an act, depending upon the methodological assumptions engaged while studying that act, students have a chance to understand more about our discipline as a discipline and to understand more about their own communicative practices.

Conclusion

The ideas I've outlined here are in some ways radical and in other ways merely emphasizing the importance of what many communication instructors are already doing. I think it is important to articulate our goals, however, and not assume that the depth of theoretical understanding which undergirds the practices we teach will be understood by our students through some magical process of osmosis. It is important to bring into awareness for ourselves and our students that the practical art that is communication is only possible through critical reflection, and that the study of communication is more than application of skills. It involves gaining an understanding of how we think about the phenomena we study and how that thought in turn influences our reflection. It involves providing students with a means to gain an understanding of the central place communication holds in what it means to be human.

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[20] Craig, 104